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DEPT FOR EAP/RSP/TC
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FROM AIT KAOHSIUNG BRANCH OFFICE

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: KAOHSIUNG KMRT SUBWAY CONSTRUCTION SITE COLLAPSES AGAIN

REF: A) TAIPEI 4419, B) TAIPEI 4353

1. SUMMARY. Beset by scandals involving foreign labor and shady financing, Kaohsiung's Mass Rapid Transit (KMRT) subway construction came to another standstill on December 5, this time due to a major cave-in at one of the construction sites. As with three previous cave-ins, this incident was caused by tunnelers hitting underground water. According to KMRT authorities this is the most serious incident to date. While workers have stopped the flow of water, a major section of the roadway above the site remains closed. An adjacent park and several buildings have also sustained damage. No one was injured in the incident. End Summary.

2. The roadway above the construction site of the KMRT Orange Line Station 07 collapsed on 5 December, despite twenty hours of frantic efforts by construction workers to stem the flow of underground water. At 4 p.m. on December 4, while digging a retention pond, workers hit an underground stream. The water ruptured a 100-meter long section of the tunnel wall. Workers immediately began attempts to stem the flow. However, leakage continued and each time that workers thought the flow had been stopped, a new cave-in occurred. By early afternoon on the fifth, a ten-meter deep 50 by 30-meter pit had developed, consuming three lanes of Chung Cheng Road and a major portion of the adjacent park. By the time the situation had been stabilized, more than 7,000 cubic meters of soil and gravel had poured into the hole.

3. In addition to disrupting road traffic, city officials have had to halt rail traffic in the area. The rail line is adjacent to the park and about 50 meters away from the cave-in site. Kaohsiung Rapid Transit Corporation (KRTC) officials estimate that it will take seven to ten days to complete temporary repairs and reopen Chung Cheng Road, which is a key traffic artery in Kaohsiung City. The rail service was interrupted as a safety precaution and will be resumed once safety officials certify that the ground under the railway is stable.

4. The cost to make final repairs to the site is estimated at NTD 500 million, roughly USD 15 million. KRTC officials said that no human error was involved as they had done a geotechnical survey of the area and determined that underground water would not pose a problem. However, the previous cave-ins also resulted from hitting underground water after geotechnical surveys had indicated that construction would not be adversely affected by underground water. Two of the previous cave-ins were in the area of Red Line Station 01, close to Kaohsiung Harbor and the Love River. The third was near Orange Line Station 08, also on Chung Cheng Road, about one kilometer from the site of the present incident.

5. The Kaohsiung City Council, which ordered a temporary halt to construction after the previous incidents, is currently meeting to discuss how to proceed in this case. There is growing concern that the subway will be unable to meet its scheduled 2007 completion date. Presently, all work along Chung Cheng Road has ceased so that crews can be diverted to make emergency repairs.

6. Comment. While KRTC officials assert that all necessary geotechnical surveys were done, they seem oblivious to the fact that the surveys have been consistently wrong. There are several underground streams that wind through the construction area, posing a substantial risk to motorists and pedestrians using the temporary roadways above the construction sites. While no one was injured in the present case, the situation would have been catastrophic had the incident occurred at rush hour rather than late on a Sunday evening. End Comment.

Thiele

Keegan